NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE ARAB-ISRAELI WAR OF 1973 AND THE INEVITABILITY OF SURPRISE

CORE COURSE (5602) ESSAY

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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
1997		**00-00-1997 to 00-00-1997**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
The Arab-Israeli War of 1973 and the Inevitability of Surprise	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**12**	

THE ARAB- ISRAELI WAR OF 1973 AND THE INEVITABILITY OF SURPRISE

The Arab-Israeli War of October 1973 was a significant benchmark in the development of modern warfare In its three weeks of intense combat , the world witnessed the devastating effects of small guided weapons on the large, swift manned machines that had dominated the air and land for decades While tanks and aircraft were not rendered obsolete the war confirmed the need for major changes in weapons procurement, air and land tactics, and force structures The microchip had transformed the armory

The 1973 War was not merely a demonstration of the impact of new technology The circumstances of its inception, conduct, and termination also provided an unusual opportunity to test more fundamental and enduring concepts of the nature of war This paper will focus on the issue that in one form or another dominated all phases of the conflict -- the repeated errors of all parties involved, combatants as well as their allies, in evaluating and properly responding to the capabilities, intentions, and actions of their opponents It was this aspect of the war, most frequently spoken of in terms of "surprise," that in fact brings one to the more basic question of how one can hope to understand the system of complex interactions that war embodies

A WAR OF MULTIPLE "SURPRISES"

The war began with one of the most successful surprise attacks in modern military history The last-minute strategic warning received by the Israeli leadership prior to its outbreak gave them only a small fraction of the time required to mobilize the

reserve forces upon which most of Israel's defense capability depended. The impact of the unexpected two-front assault was magnified by additional surprises in the technological, operational, and tactical arenas Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal far more quickly and easily than the Israelis had dreamed possible Israeli aircraft attempting to exercise their established close support role were suddenly confronted not with hostile aircraft but with a shield of missiles and anti-aircraft guns that moved (albeit inefficiently) with the Arab ground forces and which for a time inflicted unacceptable losses on them Israeli armored units, in attempting standard counterattacks against the advancing Egyptians, were confronted with light infantry firing anti-tank missiles that destroyed a staggering number of their vehicles Nearly everywhere, Arab troops stood and fought where six years before in the 1967 "Six-Day War," they had fled Israel's principal ally, the United States, experienced a similar multi-level surprise, foreseeing neither the fact that war was imminent nor the extent to which Israeli forces would suffer in the face of new weapons, methods of operation, and transformed enemy morale [1]

As the war continued, the Arab side was confronted with its own share of surprises Egyptian President Sadat, the intellectual father of the war, did not foresee the Israeli ability to move in to protect the mountain passes in the Sinai more quickly than his own forces could push ahead their anti-aircraft shield and seize the passes themselves He was surprised by the ability of the United States not only quickly to make up Israeli losses in tanks and aircraft, but also to furnish new electronic countermeasures and missiles that would help negate his modern Soviet-supplied systems He certainly did not

[1] Henry Kissinger Years of Upheaval (Boston Little, Brown and Company 1982) 465-467

foresee either strategically or tactically the Israeli crossing to the west bank of the canal at a time when his forces appeared to have nearly secured the east bank, with the resulting threat of destruction to a major part of his army Neither the Soviet Union nor the United States had foreseen this dramatic turn of events, resulting in a confused round of major power diplomacy and threats that included a Soviet airborne forces alert and the placement of U S forces around the world on heightened alert for war The latter errors in perception brought the world closer to global nuclear conflict than any event since the Cuban Missile Crisis [2]

Surprise on its most superficial level stems from the successful use, by the perpetrator, of operational security often in combination with deception Sun-tzu in his "Art of War" stated that "warfare is the Way (Tao) of deception" [3] In his autobiography, Sadat repeatedly noted his "strategic deception plan,"[4] and some of the methods he used were precisely those recommended by the Chinese sage Sun-tzu counseled "If they are rested, force them to exert themselves" and "attack where they are unprepared" [5] Sadat wrote that in May and August 1973, he launched mass media campaigns and ordered various civil defense measures designed to cause false war warnings by Israeli intelligence, with resulting costly mobilizations of reserves [6] These false signals tended to enervate the mobilization system, embarrass Israeli intelligence, and make analysts and the political leadership much less decisive in the face of new

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[2] For a personal account of Soviet deliberations, see Victor Israelyan, Inside the Kremlin During the Yom Kippur War (University Park, PA The Pennsylvania State University Press 1995)
[3] Sun-tzu The Art of War trans Ralph D Sawyer (Boulder CO Westview Press 1994) 168
[4] Anwar el-Sadat, In Search of Identity An Autobiography (Egypt Village of Mit Abul-Kum, 1977), 241
[5] Sun-tzu 168
[6] Sadat 241

warning indicators in early October Sun-tzu also advised "When your objective is nearby, make it appear as if distant "[7] Sadat wrote that in September 1973, as part of his "strategic deception," he confided to a European foreign minister in strict secrecy that he intended to be at United Nations headquarters in October 1973 He was certain that this report would be passed to the Israelis who would presumably conclude that at the stated time he would be pursuing diplomatic remedies in New York rather than directing a war from Cairo [8] Sun-tzu wrote "When committed to employing your forces, feign inactivity "[9] On the eve of the Egyptian attack, soldiers were placed in full view of the Israelis along the canal, ostentatiously engaged in various leisure activities, in contrast to the considerable combat-ready forces assembled out of sight behind the canal walls

Liddell Hart stated that the "purpose" of military strategy is "to diminish the possibility of resistance, and it seeks to fulfill this purpose by exploiting the elements of movement and surprise "[10] His concept of surprise linked with rapid, unexpected movement along a relatively weak axis was a central element in General Sharon's success in crossing over to the west bank of the canal on 16 October Acting on intelligence that the Egyptians had left a twenty-five kilometer gap between their second and third armies to the east of The Great Bitter Lake, Sharon moved his main forces at night, shielded by a diversionary attack on the front of the second army, southward along the second army, then through the gap, and finally northward to an area behind the second army at the "Chinese Farm " [11] While some of the Israeli forces fought the

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[7] Sun-tzu 168
[8] Sadat 244
[9] Sun-tzu, 168
[10] B H Liddell Hart Strategy, 2d ed (London Faber & Faber 1967) 323
[11] Frank Aker October 1973 The Arab-Israeli War (Hamden CT Archon Books 1985) 102-104

battle of the Chinese Farm on the flank and rear of the second army, Sharon brought a portion of his forces across the canal To the additional surprise of the Egyptians, who at first underestimated the importance of the crossing, the Israelis neutralized several rear area SAM complexes and cut the lines of communication between the third army and Cairo

Clausewitz raised more basic questions about the role of surprise in war He saw surprise as a means to gain numerical superiority (by moving against an unexpected and thus relatively less protected sector), as being the product of secrecy and speed, and as giving a psychological advantage to the side that employs it [12] Nevertheless, while citing several historical instances in which the results of surprise were "massive and far-reaching" (including Frederic the Great's sudden initiation of war by invading Silesia), he added that "history has few such events to record "[13] Therefore, "while it will never be completely ineffective, it is equally true that by its very nature surprise can rarely be outstandingly successful "[14] His ultimate verdict was "It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard surprise as a key element to success in war The principle is highly attractive in theory, but in practice it is often held up by the friction of the whole machine " [15] After noting that preparations for war are extremely difficult to conceal, he observed that "(i)t is rare therefore that one state surprises another, either by an attack or by preparations for war "[16]

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[12] Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1976), 198
[13] Ibid 200
[14] Ibid 198
[15] Ibid
[16] Ibid 199

At first glance, Clausewitz might be accused of placing too little value on a crucial element of war. On closer examination, however, it was this theorist, who was the least sanguine about surprise in its narrower sense of operational security, deception, and speed who shed the most light on why we are so often incorrect in foreseeing events and hence suffer the setbacks that our errors inevitably bring. In discussing the problems of "Intelligence in War," Clausewitz observed that "(m)any intelligence reports in war are contradictory, even more are false, and most are uncertain." Thus, "(t)he difficulty of accurate recognition constitutes one of the most serious sources of friction in war." These principles apply both in the planning stage at headquarters and in the course of battle.[17]

In the case of the 1973 War, there was a plethora of information available covering all of the preparations that Clausewitz said were difficult to conceal. The problem was in understanding it. In his 1979 personal account of the war Israeli General Adan noted that in the months before the war, "(w)e looked on as Egypt prepared hundreds of roads and underwater passes on the Sweet Water Canal, which runs parallel to the Suez Canal." Also observed were Egyptian preparation of graduated slopes along the Suez Canal, the construction of high ramparts on its banks that exposed the Israeli side to direct fire weapons, and Egyptian river crossing rehearsals opposite Balah Island, including breaching of barriers with water jets and placing amphibious equipment into the water to move armored vehicles to the island. In the pre-war period,

[17] Ibid. 117

Israeli aircraft had been successfully engaged by surface-to-air missiles and tanks had been fired on by anti-tank missiles in both the south and the Golan Heights [18]

On the U S side as well as the Israeli, it was known by 5 October that Soviet advisors and their dependents were being evacuated by air from Egypt and Syria under a strict twenty-four hour deadline and that "alert measures" were in effect in both Egypt and Syria [19] Yet the assessment as of that late date was that the opening of military operations against Israel by Egypt and Syria was "of low probability" [20] With all of the advances in signals and imagery intelligence and the presumably assiduous efforts of the parties involved to heed Sun-tzu's advice on "employing spies,"[21] it appears that a cognitive barrier was reached that kept the parties vulnerable to unexpected events

UNCERTAINTY AS THE ESSENCE OF WAR

In the wake of the 1973 War and the more recent errors in predicting the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, numerous scholars and practitioners have offered sound suggestions on how to improve warning systems through enhanced collection, improved analysis, and more effective means of informing policy-makers and commanders [22] Most, however, retain a nagging belief that at best one can reduce the chances for surprise, since individual biases and dysfunctional organizational dynamics can never be completely remedied Opponents may be able to take advantage of the remaining

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[18] Avraham (Bren) Adan On the Banks of the Suez (Presidio Press, 1980), 74-75
[19] Kissinger 466
[20] Ibid , quoting an intelligence assessment
[21] Sun-tzu, 231
[22] For a comprehensive view of these issues, see Ephraim Kam Surprise Attack The Victim's Perspective (Cambridge MA Harvard University Press 1988)

weaknesses Increased speed and accuracy in collecting and evaluating information may be made up for by the rapidity with which modern command and control and mobility allow forces to be brought to bear in unexpected areas

Yet the 1973 War illustrates a more fundamental difficulty that no amount of improving the system can eliminate completely Adan indicated that the ultimate problem was not the secrecy and deception employed by the Egyptians but the failure of the Israelis to understand the nature and dynamics of a situation whose elements were largely in plain view [23] Kissinger concluded that "the breakdown was not administrative but intellectual " [24] In an extremely perceptive analysis, Alan Beyerchen observed that Clausewitz understood that "seeking exact analytical solutions does not fit the nonlinear reality of the problems posed by war, and hence that our ability to predict the course and outcome of any given conflict is severely limited "[25] Nonlinear systems, "with feed-back loops, delays, 'trigger effects,' and qualitative changes over time produce surprises, often abruptly crossing the threshold into a qualitatively different regime of behavior "[26] Knowledge of the initial state of a nonlinear system can never be precise and small initial differences can blossom into totally different outcomes "The heart of the matter is that the system's variables cannot be effectively isolated from each other or from their context, dynamic interaction is one of the system's defining characteristics " [27]

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[23] Adan, 75
[24] Kissinger 466
[25] Alan Beyerchen, Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War International Security 17 No 3 (Winter 1992/1993) 61
[26] Ibid 63
[27] Ibid , 66

In Beyerchen's view, while a simple set of "principles of war" remains attractive, it is "a mirage shimmering above idealized, isolated systems."[28] In place of such illusory "linear" certainty, Clausewitz leaves us only with observations on the nature of war that contain multitudes of exceptions. At the heart of his view of war is uncertainty, manifested (a) in the complex and continuous interaction of two living forces ("In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts"[29]), (b) in friction and fog, both in the physical sense and in the overload of confusing information that faces the commander, and (c) in chance, both in its purely statistical form and in the notion of small causes having disproportionately great consequences.[30] Yet as unsettling as Clausewitz's formulations may be, the events of the 1973 War lead one to agree with Beyerchen that it is precisely this "forest of caveats and qualifications" that "more faithfully represents the conditions and contexts we actually encounter."[31]

Clausewitz stated, for instance, that the result of defeat on an army will likely be dejection and the tendency to "leave everything to fate."[32] Indeed, this was the assumption of the world in the light of the 1967 Arab defeat, leading many decision-makers and analysts in 1973 to conclude that the Arabs could not and would not fight a major war with Israel in the foreseeable future. Clausewitz cautioned, however, that defeat "may be instrumental in arousing forces that would otherwise have remained dormant."[33] The outcome is "dependent on the character of the people or state

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[28] Ibid., 89.
[29] Clausewitz, 149.
[30] Beyerchen, 76.
[31] Ibid., 89.
[32] Clausewitz, 255.
[33] Ibid., 256.

defeated "[34] General Adan wrote of the miscalculations preceding the war that "the main reason for this state of affairs was our failure to understand the Arab mentality" [35] A corollary was the failure to consider that Sadat might use maximum available force in pursuit of limited military political success [36] (It is very possible that Sadat had a more sweeping objective, such as the total defeat of Israel, but at a minimum the Israelis failed to foresee that from Sadat's perspective anything more favorable than the 1967 outcome would have been preferable to the status quo) The Israelis also erred in simply carrying over the notion that air superiority meant the same thing in 1973 as in 1967, i e , destroying the opposing air force primarily on the ground and secondarily in the air As with their armored forces, they failed to see that they were faced with a live opponent that might well avail itself of new technology in an imaginative way in reaction to their earlier superiorities (One hopes that there is not an analogous "light infantry" response available against countries enjoying information superiority) The Egyptian and Syrian miscalculations regarding Israeli resilience and flexibility while they moved ahead under rigid timelines illustrates a similar disregard for the notion of facing an opposing "living force " Of special note is Clausewitz's observation that "surprise loosens the bonds of cohesion, and individual action can easily become significant "[37] While Syrian tank units paused to await instructions on the Golan Heights, they were repeatedly counterattacked by isolated Israeli units acting on their own initiative

[34] Ibid 257
[35] Adan 73
[36] Ibid 74
[37] Clausewitz, 201

Clausewitz's observations on uncertainty should not lead inevitably to the kind of dejection that a party to a war often experiences in the wake of defeat (in this case a defeat of our tendency to think about war in linear terms). While noting that there will always be fog and chance,[38] he argued eloquently for a study of both history and theory that is far more profound than the simple learning of maxims.[39] His prescription leads toward the kind of schooled intuition that is embodied in his notion of "military genius."[40] His advice was directed toward commanders and those who select them, it could just as well apply to policy-makers and those responsible for informing them. While the foregoing discussion emphasized their errors, some of the correct decisions by both the Egyptians and Israelis reflected glimmers of this kind of genius. Yet there are few more cautionary examples than a diplomatic historian of Kissinger's stature experiencing the shock of 6 October 1973. The overall lesson from Clausewitz and the 1973 "surprises" is that those responsible for preventing analogous events in the future need to correct both the institutional and individual weaknesses that can make their recurrence more likely. It is on the individual side where the ultimate difficulty lies. The inevitably imperfect remedy is a constant search for and examination of ideas and experience (personal and vicarious) combined the humbling recognition that one might still be wrong.

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[38] Ibid., 140.
[39] Ibid., 141.
[40] Ibid., 100-12.